

MODERN FEMALE EDUCATION.

BY LOUIS FITZGERALD TASISTRO.

WOMEN and the working classes are, as regards cultivation, similarly circumstanced. Few now dispute their right to knowledge; but the best mode of presenting them with it, and the best mode of rendering the gift beneficial, remains yet an unsolved problem. The recognition of the principle, that it is the privilege of *all* to ask for knowledge, and the duty of *all* to "give to every one that asketh;" and that the only limit to the gaining and the diffusion of knowledge, is not that assigned by man—*circumstance*,—but that marked out by Providence—*capacity*;—the recognition of this principle and this duty forms an era in moral history, analogous to those discoveries in science which have subjected the elements to man's sway. As yet, however, neither has advanced much beyond a state of infancy; and to mature either in perfection, is probably reserved for the men and years of another generation.

The great misfortune then, that lies in the path of highly cultivated women, is the absence of active occupation for their mental energy, which, when combined with ambition, as it too generally is, lays waste and consumes them. Men have professions and offices; to them belong, of right and courtesy, all the activities and authorities of life. Authorship is the only accredited seat for a woman's intellect; and this, by obviating one evil, induces many others. The fever of unoccupied energy is quenched; but, by and by, the worse fever of sensitive ambition, or ungratified longing after sympathy, arises, and her position in society becomes yet more false.

Where must the cure be sought? In an inconceivably higher education of what may be called the sense of responsibility.

Wherever genius indisputably exists in a girl, there let parents and instructors frankly acknowledge its existence; and on that admission ground a simple but serious inculcation of these doctrines; that to possess intellect is, in the first instance, an accident, not a merit; that it is by no means a novelty; that, like wealth and station, it involves the most serious cares and duties; and that even superior knowledge is worthless without active virtue.

Parents and instructors must learn to regard as nothing short of *sin* all efforts to stimulate a girl's mind, for the gratification either of their vanity or hers. It is treating genius as the Jews did their false Messiahs, going out after it, with an adulating cry of "Lo here, and Lo there!" It is making mind subservient to notoriety, instead of use and happiness; it is discovering attainments from the moral application of them, which so often makes

genius, mind, and attainments, to woman a snare, an anxiety, and a reproach.

Another remedy might be found in equally high views of the influence of woman being early addressed to the heart and understanding of gifted girls, still based on the doctrine of responsibility. Show her that it is not in the quantity of talent or influence, but in the faithful appropriation of each, that merit consists; and that the moment she is satisfied to use either for mere personal advantage, she has taken a step towards becoming weak and contemptible.

The constant cry of all young imaginative minds is—

What shall I do to be for ever known?

But the next is, if a female, "there is nothing for women to do." She feels in the position of Esau; man has taken the birthright; and she fancies, that for her no blessing is left. Those who would comfort the grieving enthusiast by pointing out literary fame, would act neither wisely nor kindly; few of the many who feel the yearning are equal to the attainment of that fame; and could nothing else be objected to the remedy, it involves no general principle.

The fair answer is, to unfold to the complainant the records of biography; to show her the grand fact, that in most of the triumphs achieved by men, whether in arts, literature, morals, or religion, she has shared, and in the purest form, by having been their instructor, instigator, or friend. Separate and individual triumphs are the lot of few women, and those few are rarely happier for them; but collateral triumphs she may have without number. How few have been the distinguished men, who have not acknowledged that their deepest obligations have, at some time or other, been to a wife, a sister, or above all, a mother! Let the mind of every girl, especially of every girl of talent, be sedulously directed to this cheering view of female influence—to the beautiful and refreshing under-current which it may furnish in the troubled course of daily life.

Women are accused of being inimical to enlarged views and principles: how should it be otherwise, unless early led to look beyond petty and individual interests?—unless early led to discover the glory of a life set apart to, and consecrated by *duty*?—unless she be early convinced, that a passion for self-aggrandizement deteriorates mind, and alloys amiability? Perhaps, after all, the problem most difficult of solution is, how to make heart and mind co-operate tranquilly, imagination and will harmonize;

how to manage female intellect in connection with female sensibility. It is, perhaps, impossible that this result should ever be attained without much preparatory suffering; but surely the period of such suffering might be abridged.

The highest, and yet the simplest mode of education, consists in teaching mind to manage itself; to understand and make efficient use of its peculiar endowments; to profit by its own mistakes; and to bring into practical exercise what, in theory, it admires and loves. The melancholy, the romance, the ardour, if not untractableness, that more or less mark every gifted girl, arise mainly from unoccupied energy;—provide that energy with suitable employment, treat its possessor with tenderness, and by degrees, what seemed strange and troublesome will pass away.

The old political axiom of maintaining a balance of power among various states, might with advantage be adopted in female cultivation. Woman, as woman, is generally sure to abound in feeling; gifted woman is nearly sure to abound in its excess; hence, *she* stands less in need of stimulants than of sedatives: of the spur less than of the rein; yet, if sedative and spur are harshly inflicted, instead of a regulated mind, we may have a broken spirit. The natural remedy is, to cultivate the imagination by means of the understanding; the feelings in connection with the faculties; the heart through the medium of the head.

As a general hint, there was much wisdom in the advice given by an old mother to a young one: "Stimulate the sensibility of your boys, and blunt

that of your girls." There is nothing harsh in this last clause but the sound; the process may be effected in all grace and gentleness, by endeavouring to brace the nerves even where the heart is moved; by encouraging reason to sit as judge over sympathies and impulses; by showing that imagination and her conceptions, fancy and her fairy work, must, if good for anything, approve themselves at the bar of the understanding. Poetry and fiction devoured for amusement enervate the mind: poetry and fiction considered as subjects for study, and taken in connection with high reading of other kinds, will have a sobering effect even upon the most imaginative and romantic. It is not thinking that unrealizes the mind, but musing and dreaming. Probably those who *live* least under the influence of imagination, are practised poets and novelists, and this, from the habit of submitting their inventions to the test of judgment and experience.

Before closing these remarks, we must advert for a moment to a class of females who, as nearly as possible, seem to have all the good of cultivation and none of the evil. They may be called the enjoyers of literature, in opposition to the producers; the world never hears their names, and yet they may be clever and influential within their private sphere. Wanting genius, and free from ambition, they are interested in the minds both above and beneath them; their happiness is their chief concern: literature is the garnish of their lives, not its food; they value knowledge, but they never dream of celebrity.